

Does Obama Have a Foreign Policy Doctrine? And If So, Has It Worked?

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“The Obama Doctrine” was the title of the series of interviews on foreign policy conducted with the President by Jeffrey Goldberg and published in the April 2016 issue of the Atlantic Monthly. As the Obama presidency draws to a close, it therefore makes sense to ask not just how successful his foreign and security policy has been, but whether it has in fact been based on a coherent set of ideas.

Speaking from the Realist side of the policy debate, I would say that Obama does have a coherent set of ideas, and has been successful (or at least avoided causing unnecessary trouble) when he has stuck to them; but that the political culture of the US foreign policy establishment often makes it very difficult to maintain a Realist line; and that Obama himself has sometimes exercised insufficient control over his subordinates, partly thanks to the malign influence of Hillary Clinton. Moreover, on two critical issues at least Obama has strayed from the ethical and imaginative Realism of a Niebuhr or Kennan towards the hard, zero-sum version of Realism which combines so jarringly – not to use a stronger word – in Washington with the constant language of moralism and US moral superiority.

As is apparent from these interviews and previous statements, Obama himself is a self-proclaimed Realist. He has described the American Christian Realist thinker Reinhold Niebuhr as his favourite philosopher, and expressed his deep admiration for General Brent Scowcroft, National Security Advisor under the very Realist administration of George Bush senior. Much of Obama’s own language on foreign policy also reflects Realist tropes. Thus Obama has repeatedly spoke of the need to weigh up likely consequences and the balance of forces before taking actions.

His most famous foreign policy maxim, “Don’t do stupid s***”, is just a less elegant contemporary way of expressing the traditional Realist value of Prudence. The ethic of consequences is closely tied to Max Weber’s Ethic of Responsibility (*Verantwortungsethik*), which he and subsequent US Realist thinkers like Hans Morgenthau and George Kennan made central to their own version of ethical realism, and which they opposed the Ethic of Conviction (*Gesinnungsethik*) which demands moral action irrespective of likely consequences, and which is epitomised by figures like Samantha Powers, the anti-“Genocide” activist and Obama’s ambassador to the UN.

As the Atlantic Monthly interviews make clear, this approach goes against the instincts of large parts of the US foreign and security policy establishment, including members of his own administration. Among these are his former rival, Secretary of State and likely successor, Hillary Clinton. And while Realism has often been followed in practice by US administrations, the ideas behind it do go against the attitudes that have grown up in recent decades as a result of the combination of US ideological nationalism and the illusion – after the end of the Cold War – of

absolute and uncheckable US global power. This mixture is all too evident in the language of Hillary Clinton, and in her election propaganda “memoir”, *Hard Choices*.

If Obama has nonetheless been able mostly to stick to his Realist line – with some very important and terrible exceptions, to which I shall return – it is above all because in the wake of the Iraq disaster, the Afghan War and the hyperbolic, hypocritical and futile “Freedom Agenda” of the Bush administration, there is very little appetite indeed in the US public for more military adventures. Hence the last minute volte-face of the Republican Party in the Senate when Obama threw the issue of Syrian intervention to them to decide when the regime in Damascus (probably) used chemical weapons in 2013. After all their bluster about Obama’s “weakness” on Syria, they opposed intervention at the last minute – because they were looking at the opposition of majorities in public opinion polls, including among Republican voters.

Of great importance in this regard has also been that the US uniformed military is also strongly against more military adventures, as expressed in the famous statement of Robert Gates, Secretary of Defense under both Bush and Obama, that “Any future US Secretary of Defense who advises a President to become involved in another ground war in Asia should have his head examined”.

In August 2008 Gates was instrumental in blocking in Cabinet a suggestion from Vice President Dick Cheney that US forces should be sent to Georgia as a demonstration against Russia (though even Cheney did not say that they should actually attack Russia). As Obama complained with pardonable exasperation about the Republicans accusing him of weakness over Ukraine, George Bush had previously backed down over Georgia, after giving the Georgians much more encouragement than Obama gave the Ukrainians prior to 2014.

This is the answer to the charge against Obama of “weakness” in foreign and security policy: that as Bush himself demonstrated during his second term, there is simply no longer the will in the USA, including the US military, for military adventures that are likely to prove costly in terms of blood and money. Moreover, it has now been demonstrated that even more important than blood and money is the issue of *time*. The US – and European – populations are not willing to make the commitments necessary to turn somewhere like Iraq or Afghanistan into modern states and stable US allies if this will require a presence lasting not years but decades.

Finally, it has been proved that – despite all the past language that “the US is so powerful that if it has the will it can do anything (something that between 2000 and 2007 in Washington I heard from both Republican and Democratic foreign policy thinkers) in many parts of the world the USA fails because local states are willing to bring more power to bear, make greater sacrifices and run bigger risks than the USA; because the problems concerned are occurring on their borders and are seen as vital interests. Thus Russia is obviously not a power to match the USA on the world stage as a whole, but it has outmatched it in the Caucasus, eastern Ukraine and even Syria.

Obama has therefore operated in a world of drastically reduced US potential compared to what was assumed – wrongly – by the Bush administration and its admirers. In Syria, as noted, Obama’s “weakness” was in fact endorsed by the great majority of the US public – including those Republican supporters who love to repeat the “weakness” line. And in certain respects, while Obama obviously has a strong preference for diplomacy, he has even gone further in the use of force than Bush. Thus he has vastly expanded the US drone programme, which is one of extra-judicial assassination of enemies by another name.

What then have been the real successes and failures of the Obama administration? Obviously these include the complete failure to bring about Israeli-Palestinian peace – but the power of the Israel lobby and its adherents or slaves in the US political system make this impossible for any US president, at least in this age of the world. In defying Netanyahu over the Iran nuclear deal, Obama has gone further than any previous president in challenging Israel, and almost certainly much further than Hillary Clinton will be willing to do. The Iran deal is Obama’s greatest foreign policy success by far, followed a long way after by the opening to Cuba – something that admittedly should have happened a generation ago. Bush could have had a better Iran deal 14 years ago, but turned it down, and Clinton an even better one in 90s. Opposition to the Iran deal makes no sense unless the USA is willing to attack Iran. That now means taking side of Saudi Arabia and Sunni sectarian extremists in Middle East, pointing towards what could be a sort of de facto alliance with IS and Al Qaeda, which would be madness. This is now vastly beyond America’s strength – and is also crazy, since as even Trump has recognized, IS is by far the greatest threat to US and still more Europe. Like it or not, Iran and Hizbollah have played a critical role on the ground in containing IS. Even before nuclear deal, US was quietly co-operating with Iranian forces on the ground in Iraq to co-ordinate with US air campaign there. The same logic points towards acceptance of Russian role in Syria. It is the Russian air force that has turned back IS – because co-ordinated with a real fighting force on the ground, Syrian army backed by Hizbollah. It is this combination that has now retaken Palmyra and other places whose fall to IS caused such anxiety in the West.

Obama’s other successes have been mostly negative ones. He did not intervene in Syria in 2013 to destroy the Syrian regime and army – thank God, because if he had, the revolt of the Islamic State the following year would probably have left IS in Damascus by now. And he did not go nearly as far in putting pressure on Russia over Ukraine as US hawks – once again probably including Hillary – would have wished, thereby avoiding another foreign policy disaster and leaving the way open for co-operation over Syria and an eventual possible restoration of relations.

Concerning the failures, one has been admitted by Obama himself, in the Atlantic Monthly interviews and elsewhere. This was the failure to make serious plans for how to stabilize a post-Ghaddafi Libya, after the decision had been made to topple him. This admission is a great improvement on Hillary Clinton, who – incredibly – still seeks to portray the overthrow of Ghaddafi as a US success (the Libyan affair by the way, on top of her vote for the Iraq invasion, should disqualify Hillary from any future role in US foreign policy). But Obama did not take the next step, of recognizing (after Iraq had proved this) that the very idea of regime change by

force is a mistaken one, in circumstances where whatever it does, the US cannot in fact decisively influence subsequent developments. In other words, there often is *no* realistic plan for a stable postwar situation.

The US military withdrawal from Iraq, and the planned one from Afghanistan, were both grossly premature, and appear to have been driven largely by Obama's desire to leave a personal foreign policy "legacy" of ending US involvement in wars. The Iraq withdrawal was admittedly demanded by the Shia-dominated Maliki regime in Baghdad, but that pressure should have been resisted, because it opened the way for an unqualified Shia hegemony which paved the way for the IS revolt three years later. In Afghanistan, Obama was right to hesitate concerning the US military surge ordered in 2009, and wrong to accede to it. But he was also wrong to try to insist on the US thereafter withdrawing its forces completely by the end of last year – something that would almost certainly have led to a collapse of the US army and state. Here, the US military are often more correct in their thinking than many politicians: highly skeptical of launching wars, but determined to stay the course once the wars have begun.

A much greater criticism of Obama is not that of weakness, but on the contrary that three times he has taken actions or acquiesced in the policies of subordinates (for which he cannot evade moral and political responsibility) that have violated his own foreign policy philosophy and unnecessarily increased international dangers. These are Libya – which has already been mentioned – Ukraine, and containment of China (otherwise known as the "Pivot to Asia").

The immediate crisis in Ukraine in 2014 was not of America's making. After the Georgia debacle of 2008, Obama had in effect suspended the strategy of offering NATO membership to Ukraine and Georgia. The crisis in Ukraine stemmed from Russia's attempt to draw Ukraine into the Eurasian Union, and the determination of certain EU members (notably the Poles and Swedes) to block this by offering the Ukrainians instead a vague and grossly underfunded "Association Agreement".

But when the crisis began, Obama allowed US officials on the ground to pursue a grossly irresponsible and provocative anti-Russian policy without any possibility of the real economic or military policy to back it up. Since then, the USA has acquiesced in the Minsk Agreement, but has made no serious effort whatsoever to get the Ukrainian side to fulfill its terms. What on earth, one may ask, was Victoria Nuland, a neo-conservative State Department official married to the arch neo-con Robert Kagan, doing in the Obama administration at all, given that her attitudes run clearly counter to his?

The answer is the figures like Nuland are still favoured by Hillary Clinton (Kagan is now moving into her political camp) and much of the US foreign and security establishment; and that with regard to Russia, that establishment is still conditioned to pursue what are in effect Cold War attitudes. The end of the Cold War, the collapse of the Soviet Union and of Communism, the rise of China and of Islamist terrorism and extremism – none of these developments have had any real effect in changing these attitudes. To change them would require a President closely

involved in and informed about issues concerning Russia, with a political mandate far stronger than Obama's, and with a Secretary of State he could fully trust.

A much bigger danger is one that is rarely seen as an Obama mistake, but which could prove a vastly greater one than the continued hostility to Russia. The Pivot to Asia essentially means containing what is now probably the biggest economy and second biggest military power in the world in its own back yard, and is drawing the USA further and further into territorial disputes involving China. Clinton's own speeches and writings when Secretary of State made this abundantly clear:

"By virtue of our unique geography, the United States is both an Atlantic and a Pacific power. We are proud of our European partnerships and all that they deliver. Our challenge now is to build a web of partnerships and institutions across the Pacific that is as durable and as consistent with American interests and values as the web we have built across the Atlantic. That is the touchstone of our efforts in all these areas.

Our treaty alliances with Japan, South Korea, Australia, the Philippines, and Thailand are the fulcrum for our strategic turn to the Asia-Pacific."

(Hillary Clinton, "America's Pacific Century", *Foreign Policy* October 11th 2011)

Viewed from from China's point of view, "America's Pacific Century" means a continued commitment to unilateral US hegemony in East Asia; "working relationships" means treating China not as a great power but on the same basis as Japan, Vietnam, Philippines; "Bilateral security alliances" are with potential enemies of China; references to the US position in Europe suggests creation of a NATO in East Asia; democracy promotion threatens China with same fate as USSR.

The hostility to China has been made clear by subsequent US actions, especially in economic field: The Trans-Pacific Partnership, and even more the crude and unsuccessful attempt to block China's creation of Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank.

It is true that some of China's actions have been highly provocative, especially in South China Sea; but no attempt has been made by US policy under Obama to distinguish between different Chinese claims, or to propose compromises (thus as far as I can see, China has a good claim to the whole of the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands, a good claim to share the Paracels 50:50 with Vietnam, but no legitimate claim at all to the Spratlys or Scarborough Shoal). Instead, US is drifting towards backing anti-Chinese positions in all cases.

I have been appalled by two recent pieces of news in particular: The talk in the Obama administration of getting Cam Ranh Bay from Vietnam as a US naval base – which would risk tying USA inextricably to Vietnamese territorial claims; and the US proposal that India participate in naval patrols in South China Sea. India wisely refuses – because China can hit back very hard in Himalayas, and by support for Pakistan and would do so if challenged by India in

the South China Sea. Such moves may be too detailed for the President to take a personal hand – but they illustrate whole tendency of US establishment to maintain US dominance, and not to seek compromise with other powers unless absolutely unavoidable, as in Syria. In the case of China, the US may well be forced to acquiesce in Chinese faits accompli; but may also be drawn into Vietnamese war to defend what Hanoi sees as its territory, with disastrous results for whole of mankind.

Both the cases of Ukraine and the Pivot to Asia go against the enlightened realism that Obama claims to represent. They violate the ethic of consequences by not thinking through the likely results of US actions; they fail the fundamental realist test of accurately judging the power available to both sides and their willingness to use it; and they fail Hans Morgenthau's test of a true statesman, which is the ability to put himself into the shoes of his opposite numbers from rival countries: not necessarily in order to agree with them, but to judge how important a given issue is to them, and therefore what resources they will commit and how much they will risk over the issue. In Ukraine, Russia has clearly been willing to commit far more than the USA, and the USA has only avoided a much more dangerous conflict because President Putin is in the end a cautious and pragmatic former secret service official, not a reckless militarist. In failing to seek compromise with China, the USA may be running infinitely greater risks.

This failing however is that of the US establishment in general. US ideological nationalism (euphemistically known as "Exceptionalism") means that in the end, very few US policymakers or analysts can accord any legitimacy to views or interests that seriously conflict with those of the USA, and above all, cannot grant any real legitimacy to political systems that are neither democracies nor subservient to US wishes).

In conclusion however, it is only fair to add two things: On what Obama has called – and what obviously is - by far the biggest threat facing the USA and mankind in the foreseeable future, Obama has been entirely correct, while most of the US political establishment (including all the Republican Party though not, it must be noted Hilary Clinton) has been wrong: this is the need to take serious action to combat climate change. Here, I think one can say that he has gone as far as the US constitution and present political configuration will allow him to go. Tragically, that is not very far – as evidenced by the impossibility of passing legislation through Republican-dominated Congress (or even for that matter when Democrats in a majority) and latest Supreme Court decision blocking the President's Clean Power plan. But at least he has tried, and tried hard.

For this and other reasons, I would say that in many ways Obama is the best foreign policy president the USA has had since George Bush senior or the Nixon-Kissinger combination (which is admittedly not saying much); but despite some of his statements in the Atlantic Monthly, he has not been able to free himself sufficiently from the Washington foreign policy elites and the shibboleths to which they became addicted during the long years of American global dominance, and achieve a truly realistic US world policy which corresponds to the new world and America's new relative position in it.

Then again, he has at least tried, which is more than his likely successor Hillary Clinton has tried to do. Whoever wins in November, we are likely to look back on Obama's foreign policy with considerable nostalgia.

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